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ABSTRACT

This booklet is designed to assist state leaders as they develop their process for allocating funds to schools. It suggests components of a state-allocation process that are based on research and field experience with successfully implemented comprehensive school-reform (CSR) models. The document provides guidelines for defining the eligibility of CSR plans and advises education leaders to decide which CSR models would best meet the needs of schools in their states by convening a statewide review panel to review programs and to evaluate a wide range of national and local CSR models. State leaders should ensure that schools and communities have and use good information to make informed choices about how to use federal funding, and state and district leaders should work together to create useful forums through which schools can explore reform models and make informed choices. Education leaders should also focus on school districts that support CSR models, and federal legislation instructs states to accept applications from districts interested in helping schools begin schoolwide reform. States are required to develop plans for evaluation and accountability for schools that receive grants, and this requirement encompasses accountability at all levels of implementation. (RJM)

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COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

ALLOCATING FEDERAL FUNDS

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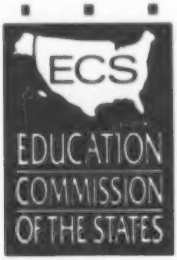

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COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

ALLOCATING FEDERAL FUNDS

In November 1997, the U.S. Congress allocated $150 million new federal dollars that states can use to support school improvement efforts. The bipartisan legislation, sponsored by Representatives John Porter (R-IL) and David Obey (D-WI), reflects a growing belief that comprehensive school reform programs are an effective way to raise academic achievement for all students. Traditionally, federal dollars have been targeted for individual programs — a math program, a literacy program, a program for limited-English-proficient students, a program for high-poverty students. What distinguishes this new allocation, known as the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) Project, is its clear message that a collection of such add-on programs does not necessarily add up to a coherent schoolwide vision that drives effective reform.

CSRD allocates funds to states through the Title I formula and the Fund for the Improvement of Education. Under this initiative, individual schools will receive, on a competitive basis, grants of at least $50,000 to implement a comprehensive school reform model and pay for technical assistance to help implement the model. How these grants flow to schools, and which schools receive these grants, will be determined at the state and district levels. While the federal legislation identifies criteria for what constitutes a comprehensive school reform model, individual states also have a great deal of leeway in determining which models receive funding.

The CSRD is a new source of dollars to help answer a question many state policymakers already are asking: how do we help schools that are failing? And while these funds are specifically targeted for this purpose, the exciting news is that the entire Title I program — literally billions of dollars — could be used for the same thing. This funding represents the tip of the iceberg in terms of federal dollars and opportunities to use them for state school improvement efforts.

Comprehensive School Reform

This booklet, one of a three-part series, is designed to assist states as they develop their process for allocating funds to schools. The following suggested components of a state allocation process are based on research and extensive field experience with successfully implementing comprehensive school reform models. Note: the order does not necessarily imply chronology.

Define the Eligibility of Comprehensive School Reforms

State leaders should decide which comprehensive school reform models would best meet the needs of schools in their states. Suggested activities include the following:

- Convene a statewide review panel to review programs and create a suggested list of eligible models.
  - ✓ *TIP: Make sure the panel has broad membership. Consider including teachers, administrators, communications experts, community members, parents and researchers.*
- Use the guidelines for identifying effective programs suggested in the booklet *Identifying Effective Models* (available from ECS). These guidelines build on the criteria required by the legislation and tailor them to meet local needs.
- Review a wide range of national and local comprehensive school reform models and evaluate them against the criteria in *Criteria and Questions* (available from ECS). Create a list of models that schools in your state should be encouraged to implement using this federal funding (the list does not have to preclude schools from selecting local or other programs, however).
  - ✓ *TIP: There are many sites on the World Wide Web that can provide descriptive information. The ECS Web site (www.ecs.org) has information on a number of comprehensive school reform models and links to organizations such as New American Schools (www.naschools.org). Also see the "Organizations" section on the* Education Week *Web site (www.edweek.org/context/orgs/orgs.htm), which lists education reform developers and education organizations.*

Conduct Broad Outreach and Dissemination

State leaders should ensure that schools and communities have and use good information to make informed choices about how to use federal funding. Suggested activities include the following:

- Hire a full-time coordinator to manage the statewide effort. The coordinator should have extensive knowledge of education in the state, good relationships with the major groups involved in education and the ability to work closely with outside providers.
- Convene groups of people from schools, districts, communities and businesses to hear what community members want for their schools and discuss why comprehensive school reform can be an effective strategy for improving student performance.
  - ✓ *TIP: Use outside expertise from organizations such as the Education Commission of the States to identify effective strategies for listening to the community and building public support.*
  - ✓ *TIP: Use your state department of education's Web site to disseminate more detailed information.*
- Create a clearinghouse of information on comprehensive school reform by collecting original copies of print, electronic and video materials describing various models. Develop a regional or district-based infrastructure to ensure that all interested schools have access to these materials.
  - ✓ *TIP: Build on existing vehicles and tools, such as public television stations, state or district newsletters, state and local media, corporate communications, the Internet, etc.*
  - ✓ *TIP: Work with local businesses to reproduce materials.*

Introduce Eligible School Reform Models

States and districts can work together to create useful forums through which schools can explore reform models and make informed choices. An effective introduction process includes the following steps:

- Share information with schools about the reasons for comprehensive reform, the benefits of working with external developers and the models eligible for funding in the state.
- Organize events that give school leaders a chance to meet reform model developers to ask questions about each model and explore how it will fit with local needs.
  - ✓ *TIP: These events will be much more successful if participants have access to materials about the models and have read them in advance.*
- Help schools involve interested groups as they explore the reform model options and build consensus among faculty and community members.
- Ensure that the introduction and exploration process allows sufficient time for school leaders to make thoughtful, informed, careful decisions without feeling rushed. Experience shows that, before a school applies for a grant, faculty members should explore the options through print, video and online information; visit demonstration sites; discuss options with state and district administrators; conduct extensive faculty and community discussions; and conduct a vote for choice of model.
  - ✓ *TIP: Experience has led most school reform developers to require that between 60% and 80% of the faculty support the choice before the organization will work with that school. Some districts have arranged for faculty members who do not wish to participate in the implementation to transfer to another school with no penalty.*

Once schools agree upon a comprehensive school reform model, they should submit an indication of interest to their school district. Districts should refer to any lists of models provided by the state in deciding which schools to support for implementation. The following suggestions may be helpful in the decisionmaking process:

- Distribute templates to schools to show evidence of commitment and readiness for implementing a model.
- Favor applications that include a statement of support from the school reform developer or assistance organization. This is a powerful indicator that the school is prepared to implement the model effectively. It is also a

sign that the developer is ready to work with that school. Some developers have limits on the number of new schools they can accept each year.

- Work to create clusters of schools in the same region choosing the same model. This step reduces the per-school cost of assistance from the developer and provides a ready-made local network for support and guidance.

Focus on School Districts Supporting Comprehensive School Reform Models

The legislation instructs states to accept applications from districts interested in helping schools begin school-wide reform. It also requires districts to demonstrate how they will use additional resources or reallocate existing funding to support implementation in schools. (In fact, states must indicate how they will assure that this takes place in order to receive funding from the U.S. Department of Education.) It is unlikely that the funding available through the new legislation will be sufficient for any district or state to make a significant impact on student learning. These funds can best be seen as a chance to jump-start the process of using effective, research-based strategies to improve student performance.

- Each participating state and district should create an investment fund, drawing on public as well as private sources, to support the introduction and implementation of comprehensive reforms. Recent changes in federal laws and regulations provide significant flexibility in the use of most federal education funds, particularly Title I, and encourage the use of federal funds to support the adoption of effective comprehensive reform models. The new federal funding can serve as a catalyst for the creation of such a fund and might help galvanize private-sector support for design implementation.
- Initial research indicates that while $50,000 per school often will cover costs associated with products and services provided by an external developer (assuming multiple schools in the same region implement the model), it represents only a portion of the total resources needed to transform a school successfully. Additional costs

include freeing teachers to participate in training and planning, upgrading technology, providing time for professional development activities and travel.

Districts and states need to invest in these additional costs of improvement. In addition, schools need to commit some discretionary resources to design implementation. This helps ensure lasting commitment and buy-in at the school level.

- The experience of school reform developers such as New American Schools has demonstrated that states should encourage school districts to support clusters of schools, rather than individual schools, for both quality and economic reasons. Developers can provide higher-quality services more efficiently and at a lower cost per school when they work with at least three to five schools located close to one another (ideally within the same district). This does not preclude a district from supporting more than one model, however. In fact, encouraging a diversity of approaches within a district generates the development of a rich array of distinctive schools. Most districts (or groups of neighboring districts) will be able to support multiple models, each with a cluster of schools.

In short, states should follow the signals in the legislation and favor the applications of districts that see the new federal funding as a catalyst to make significant changes in the use of existing Title I and other education funds. Focusing on districts with a long-term vision and effective leadership — rather than spreading funding thinly across the state — will help ensure the funding results in powerful examples of change. States also should encourage those districts and schools that demonstrate real commitment to comprehensive school reform to begin the exploration process and model selection immediately, and to develop a process to allocate necessary funds once they are received by the state.

The experience of developers and partner organizations that have worked in the field for many years indicates that districts committed to building a system with the following elements are in the best position to ensure the new federal funding is used to catalyze deep and lasting improvement:

- An investment fund to aggregate and target funding to support the transformation of schools implementing comprehensive school reform models.
- A professional development infrastructure that supports comprehensive school transformation.
- High and rigorous standards and a rich assessment system designed to measure whether students are meeting those standards.
- Decentralized authority over budgets, staffing, curriculum and instructional strategies to schools using a comprehensive reform.
- Public involvement in issues related to school performance, district performance and support for school transformation.

Build in Accountability Mechanisms

States are required by the new legislation to develop plans for evaluation and accountability for schools that receive grants. This requirement encompasses accountability at all levels of implementation. States should develop ways to ensure that districts fulfill their commitments to support schools, including financial and policy support for an evaluation of the implementation process and its effects on student performance after at least three years of implementation. Districts also should report regularly to the public on the use of federal funding and the difference it is making for students.

States might consider developing memoranda of understanding, or other types of agreements, with districts receiving funding, as well as important groups (e.g., parent associations, teacher unions, school boards, business groups, etc.). These documents establish a set of shared expectations and responsibilities, and provide an opportunity for people involved to commit publicly to supporting the successful implementation of the state's comprehensive school reform initiative.

In addition, states should hold school reform developers accountable. These organizations should be required to produce benchmarks that set expectations for implementation, initial indicators of success (e.g., increased

attendance), and eventual improvements in student performance. They should sign contracts or memoranda of understanding with schools that guarantee a certain level of assistance. Developers should cooperate with state-appointed evaluators. They also should be responsive to all questions and concerns raised by the state.

Note: For more information about choosing comprehensive school reform models, please see the other two publications in this series: Criteria and Questions *and* Identifying Effective Models. *Both are available from the Education Commission of the States: 303-299-3692. Or download the text from our Web site: http://www.ecs.org*

This document is the product of the collaboration and insights of many people, including the staff of New American Schools, the developers of the 17 comprehensive school reform models mentioned in the Comprehensive School Reform Initiative, and a host of educators and policymakers who gathered for the ECS Policies and Practices Forum in November 1997.

Copies of this three-part series are available for $7.50 from the ECS Distribution Center, 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, Colorado 80202-3427, 303-299-3692. Ask for No. AX-98-4. ECS accepts prepaid orders, MasterCard, American Express and Visa. All sales are final.

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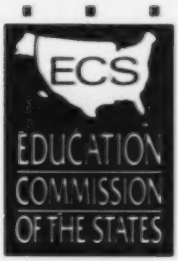

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